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C O N F I D E N T I A L KABUL 000434

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: MARSHALL FAHIM SUPPORTS KARZAI AS CARETAKER
PRESIDENT

REF: KABUL 432

Classified By: CDA Christopher Dell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Former Defense Minister and Northern Alliance commander Marshall Fahim told the Charge on 2/28 that he supported President Karzai remaining in office as a caretaker president following the 5/22 constitutional expiration of Karzai's term. Fahim broke significantly with his United Front colleagues in adamantly asserting that other options for an interim government would not be in the country's interest. He called Upper House Speaker Sebghatullah Mojaddedi and Pir Gailani incapable of putting together a strong government on short notice. "We've had too many bad experiences with them and with interim governments," he said.

¶2. (SBU) The Charge told Fahim the U.S. supports an 8/20 election because it and the international community calculate a spring election would be nearly impossible to support logistically. Furthermore, the U.S. believed Karzai should remain president during the interim period to maintain a stronger central government that was better capable of resisting increased Taliban attacks over the summer month. He asked Fahim to use his influence in political circles to guide the country to a solution that allows the international community to support a free and transparent election.

¶3. (SBU) Fahim said Karzai accepts that his term expires on 5/22 and is trying to find both a legal rationale and political consensus that allows him to stay in office. He predicted that UF leaders currently opposed to Karzai remaining in office will eventually drop their objections once the U.S. position becomes clearer. No opposition leader is preparing to organize street protests if Karzai stays on after 5/22, he said. Fahim promised to help build a consensus in favor of Karzai remaining in office and to support the 8/20 election date.

¶4. (C) COMMENT. We believe that Karzai has been working to co-opt Fahim into his government and split him from the United Front. If the president succeeds he will have dealt a body blow to his strongest opponents. From Fahim's comments we judge that Karzai's strategy is working and we expect the president to continue to try to pick off other UF members (Hazara leader Mohaqeq is an obvious next target). The current electoral dilemma was precipitated by Lower House Speaker Qanooni and First Vice President Massoud, who sought to challenge Karzai's continuing legitimacy as president in an effort to damage his re-election prospects. Karzai appears to have deftly turned the tables on them and may succeed in dividing the opposition, leaving Qanooni and Massoud isolated and struggling to regain the initiative (reftel). There's no better proof than the statements by some UF members insisting on an August election, a 180-degree turn from their earlier position -- which triggered the current dilemma -- that Karzai would be an illegitimate president if elections were not held by 5/22.

DELL